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Barcelona, a 26 de maig de 2020

Signatura: Alejandro García Olivar

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alejandro', with a stylized flourish underneath.

Abstract

This essay explores the life and human side of Victorian Era writer Charles Dickens from the point of view of celebrity theory. Using this relatively recent field of studies in sociology I build the argument that Charles Dickens is not only one of the first celebrities in recorded history, but also one of the best ones in fulfilling that role. Introductions and explanation about celebrity theory is also included.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, celebrity theory, Victorian era, sociology.

Resumen

Este trabajo explora la vida y lado humano del escritor inglés Charles Dickens desde el punto de vista de la teoría de celebridades. Con esta reciente rama de estudios sociológicos pretendo argumentar que Charles Dickens es no solo una de las primeras personas a las que se puede considerar una celebridad, sino que es una de las que mejor ejemplifica ese rol. Además, se incluyen una introducción y explicación sobre los estudios de celebridades.

Palabras clave: Charles Dickens, teoría de celebridades, era victoriana, sociología.

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens is the most important writer of the Victorian era, even if his work was released only during the first three decades of the period due to his life being cut short in 1870 at only 58 years of age. He struck gold with only his second novel, *Oliver Twist*, published during 1838 in serialized form and considered the first Victorian novel. He went from strength to strength, authoring novels such as *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. He also had time in his busy life to dabble into short-form writing with his Christmas books, most notably *A Christmas Carol*, which with its social criticisms and imagery defined the way the English speaking world understood the holiday season for generations to come. Known for his lively characters that often dealt in the extremes of emotion, he cemented a legacy that endures to his day and generates great interest in scholars of 19th century literature.

This essay will start from a necessarily short overview of the author's life. An analysis of his life will be conducted through the lens of celebrity theory, a field of sociology studies that came to prominence in the 20th century, with the purpose of arguing that the English author was a celebrity at a time in which some scholars believe such a concept had yet to be invented.

The origin of this thesis can be found in some previous exposure I had to Dickens, his novels, as well as the concept of celebrity. This took place during my Erasmus exchange last year, where I went to study over to Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland. I had Dr. Leon Litvack as my lecturer and tutor for the course, a Victorian Studies professor and expert on all things Dickens, in fact, some of his latest work has been used as source for this very essay. On that occasion there was more focus on the literary part of Dickens's career, so now my objective is to look at his life and the social phenomenon he became, explaining the causes and effects of such a situation and establishing links with our current understanding of celebrity status.

The research phase of each of the three sections that compose the essay has had a few difficulties, though they can be summed up into two large groups, one that I hope becomes apparent in my work and the other I hope to have remedied at best as possible. The one I wish to highlight is just how busy the man's life was. He not only wrote and acted but was also involved in journalism and charity all along his life. He had no less than ten children and yet managed to keep his life orderly enough to create some of

literature's greatest classics. This I want to convey in order to illustrate how precious his time was and make the case of his similarity to current day celebrities. This whirlwind of fame around the subject of my essay makes so that when I wish to look into any particular anecdote suddenly several accounts of the same event come up, as everyone in Dickens's circles liked to journal their particular encounter with the writer. This then means that I have had to take a different angle in which to approach the biography section, as it was impossible to give a fair representation of the figure of Dickens given the immense volume of biographic material on him and the limited time to cover it all.

The aspect that I hope to have mitigated is the lack adequate sources for the celebrity theory part. There is lots of information out there, but it does not help much if it is unavailable or behind paywalls with astronomic prices. To remedy this, I have had to make do with what I have and put together an argument and comprehensive explanation with a few valuable pages I found here and there.

On the biographical section I focus on the fact that he worked in a factory at a young age and from that starting point I make the case about that time of labour shaped his literature, his criticisms on society and his philanthropist endeavours. Furthermore, I also discuss more biographical facts and compare them to how they are represented in *David Copperfield*, his most autobiographical novel. Initially I had considered a simple summary of his life, but it quickly became apparent that was both unsatisfactory and a monumental undertaking, as I would need to familiarize myself in great depth with his biography in very little time. I believe the current structure is a more compelling narrative and a more fitting one for my purpose.

The second section is a critical discussion and exploration of celebrity theory, which works as an introduction to the topic and synthesizes the work of many authors. There is a conscious effort to provide a clear definition for the term 'celebrity', a concept for which we all have a certain sense of understanding but is hard to nail down. I will also mention some criticisms of celebrity theory, and how it affects society, as well as wrong predictions about other social groups like celebrity.

Perhaps one of the most interesting parts in the essay is contained in the last section, the one about celebrity theory applied to Dickens. Here, and working as an introduction to that chapter, there is some time given to the history of celebrity theory, and it helps demonstrate a few things. Firstly, the ability scholars have to disagree on the most superfluous things, as each one points to a different person as the first celebrity to have ever existed. Secondly, that there are fewer differences between us and the people

two centuries ago than what we could imagine, one only has to read the accounts of the frenzy that would ensue when Dickens would walk around the street and the magnitude of the excitement could be straight out of a report on Beatlemania, perhaps the closest celebrity happening in terms of scale.

We are certainly not above those that preceded us when it comes to enjoying our entertainment. The figure of the factory boy that grew up to be one of the most celebrated writers of all time is a prime example of how societies react to celebrities, and how this reaction to celebrity elevated what was a mere social status into becoming a phenomenon. How the respect for one's work morphs in a worldwide sensation during a single person's lifetime is the object of study for this essay.

PART I: BIOGRAPHY

Charles Dickens was born the 7th of February 1812. Only twelve years later he was put to work in Warren's Blacking factory. He fixed the labels on bottles of boot-blackening during 10-hour shifts for which he earned six shillings a week. It may seem a strange decision to skip the first decade of his life, but no event marked Dickens so deeply in his lifetime. In fact, the shame and impact caused by this period of his time would not be revealed in private to his best friend John Forster until decades after, and to the public after his death in his authorized biography. (Patten, 2018, p.9)

It is important to mention, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer addresses in her section in the Oxford Handbook, the difficulty of tracking Dickens's life with total accuracy. As covered in a later section, he was very tight-lipped on matters that would have detracted from his public persona, and discoveries about him have only trickled down in the following decades thanks to in depth research on his correspondence and that of the people who knew him. The central work for all things Dickens is the previously mentioned biography by Forster. *The Life of Charles Dickens* (1872-74), which contains the author's account of his life as told by himself. Bodenheimer warns us that "Foster was naturally concerned to protect his subject's reputation" (p.11) so he gladly skipped over some of the details that would have caused uproar in Victorian society, like his affair with actress Ellen Ternan after separating from his wife. This tells us that we will likely never get the full picture of Dickens, only what both he and his friend considered to be acceptable, but that does not detract from Forster's work, as his is a crucial text for Dickens scholars and the authority of the work has never been superseded.

Returning to the matter of his child labour, the situation came about after his father, John Dickens, was imprisoned during three months for failing to pay his debts. This forced twelve-year old Charles Dickens to start working to earn some money and sustain the family. This much was revealed no sooner than May 1847 and until January 1849, when Forster in conversation with Dickens asked him about a rumour of him having been seen working in a warehouse. Slater describes how this left the author speechless "for several minutes" (Slater, 2011, p. 278) and started him on a two-year process where he would reconstruct his earlier years during many further conversations, letters, and journals addressed specifically to his friend. Forster would tell the details of what he learned in the second chapter of his biography in the section 'hard experiences in

boyhood'. Additionally, Dickens was so transfixed by the memories so long forgotten that, according to Forster, he went onto write *David Copperfield* as a result.

I am focusing a great deal on this period of his life because it helps us speculate on what he was like as a person and the many interpretations scholars have made of his life based on the information available. His life was certainly eventful, but I think trying to summarize it all here would be unhelpful to the larger task at hand; and that looking at a specific part of his life and reviewing the literature can afford us greater insight. Contemporary Dickens biographer Peter Ackroyd offers a new reading of his motivations when discussing his time at Warren's. Ackroyd warns the readers that Dickens's memories as told by himself were "not necessarily to be taken literally". (Patten, p.13) He constructs the author as someone with a certain degree of self-pity and lamentation, who might have exaggerated the lowest parts of that time. While understandably touched by the period at the factory, Dickens still had the support of his family as far as lodging, clothes and company goes, a far cry from the situation he puts little David Copperfield in when he is forced into working by the Murdstones. That is not to say Dickens may have been unfaithful to the truth, but that, as Ackroyd explains, he was a man who believed what he felt at any moment was entirely true, and would often use convenient deformation of the truth to spin his life story as a product for consumption (Patten, p.13).

Furthermore, the length of his employment remains shaded in mystery: Dickens admitted to Forster that "I have no idea how long it lasted; whether for a year, or much more or less." (Ackroyd, p.95) Current day consensus places his time in Warren's to be between six and twelve months, a period after which he resumed schooling, but was left scarred from the experience for life. Ackroyd proposes the notion that, in part due to his propensity to self-pity, he often wondered what would had been of him had he remained working for the rest of his life, and that this can be observed in his literature. With the likes of "Little Dick who dies in the workhouse from *Oliver Twist*, Jo from *Bleak House*, Smike from *Nicholas Nickleby*, it is almost as if Dickens were populating his fiction with images of his own potential lost self" (Ackroyd, p.96). He was so notable for this tendency that the adjective 'Dickensian' came into existence to describe people or situations with characteristics similar to the ones he had created in the novels.

Later in life this experience would give him greater sensitivity for social causes, and he would often use his grasp on the public's attention to focus the spotlight on issues that mattered to him. For instance, he was heavily against the Poor Law Amendment act of 1834, usually called the New Poor Law, which was meant to reduce the cost of looking

after the poor and make them sustain themselves. (National Archives) This piece of legislation cut costs for the country by making people work upwards of fifteen hours a day and pushed a lot of people to commit crimes out of desperation. In turn this created greater disdain from the higher classes toward the poor, which makes it the more meaningful when in 1844 Dickens proclaimed in a social gathering “I do not myself believe that the working classes were ever the wanton or mischievous persons they have been so often and so long represented to be,” (Slater, 1970, p. 100) and decided he would strike a “sledge-hammer blow” in favour of the cause of defending the poor. With this resolution he wrote *The Chimes*, the second of his Christmas books and a much more focused attempt at entering the political arena. He had toyed with social commentary in *The Christmas Carol* in a more casual way the previous year, and in 1844 he went all in. The story does much to criticize greed, but the biggest parallel with reality, and one where we can more clearly observe how real events influence his writing, is found in the scene where Meg is on the verge of committing suicide by jumping into the river with her baby so both can be free from their miserable struggle to survive. This echoes the real-life case of Mary Furley, a woman prosecuted for infanticide in 1844 who tried to drown herself and her baby, but ended up being rescued from the waters before she could perish, after her baby had already died in the river (Slater, 1970, p. 100). In the story Meg does not jump in the end, since the character oppressing her learns that humanity should strive for nobler things than material gain, while in real life Furley had her initial death sentence changed to a seven year transportation to the colonies due to the public outcry after the initial ruling.

Another of Dickens’s interests was the figure of the ‘fallen women’, a certain archetype of woman that was becoming more abundant at the halfway mark of the 19th century. They were women who had to resort to thievery or prostitution to support themselves, a point at which they would become disgraced and outcasts of society. Based on the purpose of sheltering these women and providing them with an acceptable life Urania Cottage was created, a home or asylum first conceived by Miss Burdett-Coutts and elaborated upon by Dickens “with all the ferocious enthusiasm of his fervent and nature.” (Ackroyd, p.494) The home started operating in 1847 and Dickens would always make time in his busy schedule to manage it as best he could: he chose the girls, was very careful with the staff he employed, thought of activities for the girls and took care of the paperwork in general. The goal of Urania Cottage was to teach the girls to read, write, cook and sustain themselves through more dignified means, with the goal of having them

eventually marry into happiness or emigrate to the colonies to start a new life. (Tomalin, 2008) As was often the case with the author, this interest permeated his fiction in various forms, namely the character of Little Em'ly and Martha Endell from *David Copperfield*. Ever since David first meets her, Em'ly always expresses her desires to be a lady, and all appears to go well when she is seduced by Steerforth, but eventually he leaves her and she finds herself without her family or status, so she ends up fleeing to Australia to begin anew, a situation not unlike that of the many women in Urania Cottage. Martha's story is similar, but she sees herself as disgraced from the very start and it is only by helping David and not asking for anything in return that she can be morally redeemed and get back in society, though she goes to Australia as well. The final chapters of these characters were not yet written when Urania opened so biographers often point to it playing a central role in Dicken's inspiration. He would manage the asylum until 1858, "when it became impossible for him to remain connected with it." (Tomalin, 2008)

I have alluded now a few times to *David Copperfield* as a novel where Dickens would reflect his reality, for one it is his longest one in terms of word count, so there is plenty of room for that; but much more importantly, it was his most autobiographical novel and the one dearest to him. Forster said that with that book he took "all the world into his confidence." (Slater, 2011, p.297) Additionally, Dickens revealed one in a letter "I am not quite sure that I ever did like, or ever shall like, anything quite so well as *Copperfield*." (Hogarth, To Boyle, 1852) Using this novel as a starting point I can cover a few more points about his life and cover lesser known parts of it. His conversations about *Copperfield* also help give further credence to the current interpretations of how he viewed himself. I have established that he had a tendency for self-pity, a tendency that shifted to considerable pride when he was able to turn around his fortunes through writing. He said in a speech from the period in which he was writing *Copperfield*:

If you are born to the possession of a silver spoon, it may not be very difficult to apply yourself to the task of keeping it well polished on the side-board, but . . . if you are born to the possession of a wooden ladle instead, the process of transmuting it into that article of plate is often a very difficult and discouraging process (Slater, 2011, p.291).

It was this process of self-betterment that was a common thread throughout his life, and he made it one of the central issues of the book with David going from humble beginnings in a blacking factory to becoming a famous writer like his creator.

Touching now on an additional bit of information about Dickens's private life, and one of his finest moments when it comes to seamlessly weave reality into his fiction, there is the matter of Maria Beadnell, likely the author's first love interest and one that left a painful mark. His marriage to Catherine Hogarth, how it turned sour, and the following affair with young actress Ellen Ternan are well documented nowadays, but the story about how Dickens first fell in love in 1830 with the daughter of a banker is a much less popular story. The gist of it that "his advances were at first favoured and then neglected and finally rebuffed" (Ackroyd, p.142), as it seems her parents were not keen on their daughter being involved with the then unknown youngster from a lower class family. It is hard to overstate the extreme emotions this caused in Dickens, who went from being madly in love at first sight to utterly heart broken, so much so that he scrapped his plans for an autobiography he was writing because the recollection of memories from that time hurt too much to bear.

Dickens did eventually revisit his memories when writing *Copperfield* as he based the character of Dora Spenlow, David's first wife, on his experience. He said as much when, twenty years later, he was contacted by Beadnell: "You may have seen in one of my books a faithful reflection of the passion I had for you." (Bass, To Mrs. Winter, 1855) The writing process was hard, admitting to Forster "no one can imagine in the most distant degree what pain the recollection gave me in *Copperfield*." Perhaps the arc of having David, who is an embodiment of Dickens himself, marry his sweetheart but then having him realise she is not right for him after all is an act of maturity on Dickens's part, almost as if he had the chance to live through David what would have happened if his life had gone any different. That said, Dickens had immense appreciation for the novel, he called it his "favourite child" in the preface of the 1867 edition, and he did in fact name the ninth of his children Dora after the character that sent him looking in his darkest memories.

As for the things he is famous for, what he did in his prime as writer, many of those will be discussed further ahead in the essay. Most notable for the purpose of my argument are the public readings which he started as an activity for charity in 1857. These lasted all the way up to a couple months before his death in 1870, the last one being the Final Farewell Reading in he did in London. These readings took him as far

as the United States and helped spread his popularity as much as they helped fill his pockets in times when money was tight due to illegal printing of his novels.

Trying to tackle the life of Charles Dickens is a daunting task so here I have offered a condensed view of the qualities that made him be the figure that he was, both in terms of the things he cared about and the things he wrote about. It might just be the case that his relatively short stint at blacking factory set his life on course to be of the most celebrated writers there has been. He poured himself into his books even when it deeply hurt, mostly with *Copperfield*, the book that was his favourite child and the one that made him feel like “sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World” (Ackroyd, p.565), and it was that dedication to his craft that made him become, as I shall discuss, a worldwide celebrity.

PART II: CELEBRITY THEORY

Many of us are probably familiar with the concept of celebrity, as we often know how to tell a celebrity apart among a crowd of random people and have a sense of what they are. The lines become blurred when trying to draw a line in the sand and establish a difference between celebrities, famous people and high-status groups (monarch, nobility), as there are different degrees of overlap in the definitions for all of them. It's also a tough task to pinpoint a moment in time where celebrities began to appear in society, maybe there was an event that caused the phenomenon to erupt into the scene, or maybe celebrities have been a part of society all along, and it is just in recent time that we have coined a word to address them.

To begin on an upbeat note, research has shown that we can all participate in the celebrity craze or be as close to it as it gets. In his 1972 paper, researcher Stanley Milgram speaks of the concept of the Familiar Stranger, a phenomenon that takes place in a social environment where, overtime, you start to recognize the faces of individuals you see repeatedly. This can happen anywhere: the train station, the gym, even with colleagues in the workplace. Milgram establishes a few requisites for someone to become a familiar stranger: they must be observed, these sightings must occur over a long period of time, and no meaningful interaction can take place. Anyone can be a familiar stranger, but what the research shows is that even in these environments of no interactivity, there are individuals who stand out as being recognized by a higher amount of people than others, thus making them "socio-metric stars" (Milgram, p.53). They enjoy a certain degree of privilege associated with their lowkey celebrity, as in the case of a woman who collapsed on the street and was aided by a neighbour who had her as a familiar stranger, and claimed to feel a certain sense of responsibility toward her, as the rapport built over time pushed him to action. Milgram concludes that familiar stranger status is not the absence of relationship, "but a special form of relationship" (Milgram, p.53) on its own right, one that is accessible to most people and that comes with its own properties.

But this is not what one pictures when thinking about celebrity; our minds conjure up images of magazine covers, stars followed by masses of photographers and screaming fans, individuals so far removed from the *real world*, that they would not know how to function outside their celebrity bubble. This is the phenomenon this section of the essay is focusing on: the one that has been widely studied and wildly predicted about, but the one where there is hardly any consensus.

Those who do agree to set a fixed time period and even a place for the emergence of celebrity do so at around the beginning of the 20th century in North America, when capitalism was taking shape and mass media was becoming a thing. Fast, cheap and easy printing of images was key in putting celebrities in front of everyone's eyes and allowed for the construction of audiences. This in itself is a change from the previous norm in which notable people were so because they possessed a talent, or created something the public desired such as fiction literature or poetry; in the current time people are "known for their well-knownness." (Kurzman et al, p.352) In the following decades the public relations industry, gossip columns, fan clubs and magazines offering details about certain celebrities created a new need in consumer of media. Suddenly the interest was not just in the songs the person sang or the films they appeared in, but their misconducts on set, their troubles with substances, their romantic relationships and every single detail that can be obtained through whatever means necessary. As sociologists have expressed celebrity is the "commodification of reputation" (Kurzman et al, p.353): one's image is a good for sale, and there is always someone willing to buy it.

Another trait that usually goes hand in hand with celebrity is its fleeting nature. This is not a main component of it, as there are stars who manage to remain in the zeitgeist for decades, but it characterizes a large majority of the celebrities existing at a given moment. This volatility stems from the fast turnover of media in current days, one can be a one-hit wonder songwriter or be cast in a big movie as a child actor who then goes on to never appear on the big screen again. In due time this results in yet another type of content format: the "Where are they now?" and "Has-been" kind of pieces which feed the public's morbid curiosity for individuals who have exited the system and ended up unfavourably.

That last concept about celebrity being a system really helps us narrow down a definition for it: celebrity is a new system of social status, akin to other high-status groups that existed in the past such as the nobility, rich people, members of high caste in countries with systems, or landowners. It has its own special traits like the aforementioned volatility, but shares many characteristics with other, previously existing high-status groups. Charles Kurzman and his team detailed a few of them in a 2007 paper that focused on the privileges associated with celebrity status.

Firstly, they speak about the interactional privilege celebrities enjoy in social settings and the situations that arise from that. A celebrity's main currency is attention, and as such they can direct it to themselves or point to a certain cause they want the public

to care about, whether that is politics or their own brand. When the interest is aimed to the person, this creates a weird dynamic in the adoring crowds: as the public knows so much about the celebrity's life a sort of unilateral para-social relationship develops (Kurzman et al, p.356). Any given fan feels extremely close to their singer or influencer of choice, much more than the connection the artist can feel to the audience as a whole, and when taken too far the sheer intensity can negatively impact the celebrity's quality of life. In fact, we can hardly notice a rich person walking down the street, but we will immediately see a celebrity and relish forever the time spent near them as if blessed by their presence. This is what causes public figures to live in secluded areas or neighbourhoods and seek contact with other celebrities who have the same experiences. In the long run this creates celebrity couples, a union which boosts their social status even more; with the perfect example being "Posh and Becks" (David and Victoria Beckham) labelled by Kurzman as the definitive celebrity couple.

Secondly, he mentions the normative privilege, which is the one that refers to how celebrities are often considered authorities on certain topics just because they are famous, and how people follow their example and seek to imitate their lifestyle in cheaper ways. This notion comes from the end of the 20th century, a time in which "fame was disassociated from beauty, talent or accomplishments" (Kurzman et al, p.354) and fame is just a thing that some individuals possess along with those qualities. Kurzman notes that there are people simply known for being good looking, the discrepancy arises when they are treated as authorities despite their good looks being the product of other people's work such as makeup artists, hairdressers, or diet experts.

The economic privilege is possibly the more straight forward one: fame brings money; and being among rich people creates opportunities to become even richer, whether that is through legal means or otherwise. They also operate on a different economic network to regular people, are admitted to institutions where they operate with specialists who work only with celebrities, such as high-end real estate agents or financial advisors, whose job is to preserve and increase their client's wealth. It is this economic privilege that has pushed many to seek their day in the sun, and as such we have ended up celebrity chefs, celebrity doctors, celebrity judges, celebrity brokers among other, who thanks to their newly acquired fame can charge extra to clients and advertise their business.

Lastly, we come to discuss the legal privilege which includes a few perks. For one, there is the right celebrities have to legally own their own image and name and all

the revenue generated by them. This is noteworthy because until the 50s celebrities in the United States did not own the rights to their likeness, and at the very early stages of motion picture actors were not credited for their performance. Their status was what got them the leverage on officials to push them to change legislation in their favour. Another perk is the platform the media gives to celebrities to make their case before going to trial, in order to have the public's opinion on their side if justice were not to agree with them. This may also backfire and result in public scorn, but it does not stop celebrities from trying.

The point Kurzman argues for in his paper is that celebrity is a status group just like the ones that existed in previous centuries and societies. The need to argue this seemingly uncontroversial statement comes from the words German sociologist Max Weber wrote at the beginning of the 20th century, just as celebrities were starting to emerge in the US. He claimed that high-status groups would disappear under capitalism, as the values pushed by the elites are contrary to the ones that the then emerging economic system are based on. According to him, high-status groups are focused on the past and resist market competition, meaning that they desire to retain their privileged position, whereas capitalism is meant to thrive on competition. There is greater depth to Weber's social theory, but his main argument falls flat in the face of celebrity. He could not have foreseen the appearance of a new social group, let alone one that is fuelled by the very same capitalism that was meant to dissolve the other groups, which, of course, have not gone away. The part Kurzman concedes is that most remaining high-status groups are considered archaic by most, hangovers of a premodern time where society was more aristocratic, patriarchal and racial. Celebrity is different as it is not based on those principles, but on the rapid consumption of media and conversation around certain individual, as he says, "celebrity is status on speed" (Kurzman et al, p.363). The fast turnover of celebrities ensures that the available attention span of the population is spread over a large number of individuals vying for a piece of the pie. Celebrity is also not inheritable, at least not necessarily, as there is no need for the children of celebrities to be famous for the group to be sustained, as would happen with a monarchy; new celebrities are going to appear.

After this long-winded explanation, one may picture celebrities as despicable beings who are not only talentless but that also get to enjoy cool perks from being famous. There might be some truth in that, but we must also consider Robin D. Barnes differentiation between fame and celebrity:

Fame has traditionally been associated with individual demonstrations of superior skill or striking deeds as displayed by a select few, then chronicled by contemporary authors and historians. Celebrity, on the other hand, is more transient, relying on marketing, timing and instant appeal (Barnes, p.19).

This quote is helpful to understand the entire picture, as it suggests that when a new star bursts into the scene, either for appearing in a film or by having made hit song or any display of talent that attracts the public's attention, they have just earned fame, and then they turn into celebrities once the media machine and tabloids start doing their thing. Someone might still just luck into celebrity status by marrying a person who then goes on to be a celebrity, but there is certainly still space to appreciate talent. The point is that there are many paths into celebrity status, and that some just require more effort than others.

Lastly, and to give some further credit to Max Weber for his social theory on status, we must address the ever-present question: why do some people become celebrities? Here Weber introduces a concept that is still widely used to explain this point, and that is the role of charisma. He uses the word in the sense of a gift of power of leadership or authority, with the capacity to inspire devotion or enthusiasm. A charismatic individual to him is one that does not follow social conventions or routine occupations. It is important to keep in mind that his work was written mostly focusing on politics, and that his native Germany was going through a rough patch in the first two decades of the 20th century, but most of the theory applies to the matter at hand.

He argues that individuals who have achieved political and cultural sway in history have been perceived as "mystical" (Weber, p.296) and "spiritual" (Weber, p.52), and their authority was not questioned in their time since it was felt as legitimate because it had the implicit and explicit consent of the governed.

As closing thoughts, we will consider some of the criticisms of celebrity culture, though much of the blame is placed on the media rather than on the individuals themselves. Horkheimer and Adorno argued in their 1944 paper that a mass culture where everyone idolises the same people results in sameness across society. In such a society, one where the media pushes for standardization of content, we inevitably run the risk of having our culture be imposed from above and having what the content is consumed be defined by others. When everyone is following the same celebrities, it becomes easier for the media to target their content, and as we already discussed, high-status groups do not welcome market competition, so small independent productions can hardly thrive.

PART III: DICKENS AND CELEBRITY

Now that I have explained what the concept of celebrity means, who celebrities are, how society works around them and what it takes to become one, I want to embark on a discussion which aims to undermine what little consensus there is about the beginning of celebrity. As explained above, most sociologists agree on marking the beginning of celebrity culture around the first half 20th century, given the social changes the new time could afford. However, as it is usually the case, there are those who argue celebrities have existed for far longer than that, as is the example of cultural theorist Chris Rojek who claims Alexander the Great was in fact the first celebrity. (Barron, p.13) Others are not so brave to point a specific person in history or moment, but they recognize the central role of imagery in the development of celebrity, or even just fame. Leo Braudy, cited by Joss Marsh (Marsh, p.98), recognizes the importance of imagery and establishes a direct link through time in the practice of portraiture that goes from the minting of notable individuals into Roman coins all the way to modern photography.

Marsh argues that if there is an earlier period which can be pointed at as the beginning of celebrity culture, that is the 18th century. He names many notable individuals from the period: the philosopher Rousseau, Shakespearian actress Sarah Siddons, writers James Boswell and Samuel Johnson, and perhaps his strongest argument is the one for German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who had a marked influence on his readership inasmuch as his text *The Sorrows of Young Werter* launched a wave of suicides amongst them. He continues by building on the words of Rojek, who likens celebrity to a religious formation with its practices and rituals, and points to the outright adoration the public felt for opera divas like Adelina Patti, the pilgrimages adoring fans made to the house of Wordsworth and the petitions made by the people to “be in the ‘presence’ of the pre-eminent Victorian ‘sage’, Thomas Carlyle.” (Marsh, p.99) Maybe the media machinery in those days was not as prevalent as nowadays, but it is hard to deny that those people inspired the same devotion in their fans as celebrities do today, thus making it hard not to extend our understanding of celebrity culture a couple centuries back. They even had their own stereotypes back in the day, one of the most notable ones being the one of the romantic poets who died young, although Lord Byron monopolized a lot of the attention in that sector from 1824 and onwards, and left little attention for other poets dying of tuberculosis or drowning.

It is possible to justify the celebrity status of these poets by running through the aforementioned celebrity privileges and seeing how well they fared in comparison to our modern stars. For example, it is not a rare sight to see Taylor Swift mobbed by fans when exiting her New York apartment, the situation going as far as she needing to be transported inside a large box when exiting her property. (Baxter-Wright, 2018) That eccentricity is not too dissimilar to that of English author Alfred Tennyson who decided to build his own private bridge over the footpath leading to his home so he could avoid the admirers along the way. It is hard to conceptualize this as part of the interactional privilege, but these are examples of late-stage para-social relationships that fans form with celebrities. Another privilege that is as old as time is the economic privilege, in this case exemplified by a Yates quote in which he comments on how J.L. Toole's house cost him "less than a single night's performance," (Marsh, p.101) indicating the considerable amounts of money they were managing.

The article by Marsh provides more examples to support that many Victorians were in fact celebrities, but they do little more than build up to the conclusion of his argument: that Charles Dickens was the definitive celebrity of his period, as he not only had many of the traits a notable person would have back in the day, but his presence is still rippling through society due to both his figure and his works.

Marsh's article is littered with accounts of appreciation to the famed English writer: "The man was a phenomenon, an exception, a special production" (Marsh, p.102) said Lord Shaftesbury, a Dickens contemporary. Literary critic George Henry Lewes remarked after the success of *The Pickwick Papers* how Dickens' fame was "immense ... popularity almost unexampled, embracing all classes"; and Marsh adds a bit of his own praise: "His experience of celebrity was diagnostic, foundational, premonitory." (Marsh, p.102)

It is hard to put together a comprehensive compilation of all the praise Dickens got and the reasons he got it for, as one of the virtues of literatures is that it touches everyone in different ways. Some people cared deeply about the characters; as in the story told by Dickens researcher Leon Litvack, (Litvack, Dickens's Dream) who narrates how American readers would go to the docks and yell to the ship bringing new numbers of *The Old Curiosity Shop* asking "Has Little Nelle died yet?" (Litvack 1:53) such was their interest in the novel. Other readers engaged with a multitude of characters and wished to thank the writer himself, such as one woman who reportedly asked Dickens on the street "Will you let me touch the hand has filled my house with many friends?" (Ward, p.104)

this also being an example of the cult of personality which existed around him even during his lifetime.

Dickens was and still is known for many of his works in the English-speaking world, but internationally it was his Christmas books that secured him worldwide fame even to this day. *The Christmas Carol* is of course the most popular one of the lot, but one must not forget other books such as previously discussed *The Chimes*, which was filled with social criticism and helped to show the lower classes that Dickens sided with them in their distaste for utilitarianism and the policies it was informing. Policies like the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 which ensured the poor, including children, were housed in workhouses in return of foster and food, a regulation not too dissimilar to slave labour. (National Archives, 2018)

What the English author did, almost inadvertently, was to define how Christmas would be represented in our culture for years to come. He portrayed the holiday season as a time for personal introspection and growth for the individual; and compassion and understanding for the community.

My purpose was, in a whimsical kind of masque [play] which the good humour of the season justified, to awaken some loving and forbearing thoughts, never out of season in a Christian land. I have the happiness of believing that I did not wholly miss it. (Dickens, Cheap Edition of the Christmas Books, 1852)

He was aware of the special relationship the public had with him, and as such he felt an obligation to satisfy his audience's expectations, expressing in a letter that he did not wish to leave "any gap at Christmas firesides which I ought to fill." (Slater, 2011, p.272) The initial run of *The Christmas Carol* was not a commercial success, but with time people grew to adore the impact he had in their lives. A neat story that captures the larger-than-life nature that Dickens had achieved by the time of his death is recorded to have taken place on the day the author passed, when a coster barrow girl who sold fruits and vegetables in Covent Garden asked "Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?" (Waters, p.58)

Theodore Watts-Dunton, the writer who reportedly heard the sorrowful words from the girl, goes onto say:

It was from her I learned that were there at the time thousands and thousands of the London populace who never read a line of Dickens-who never, indeed, had had an opportunity of reading a line-but who were, nevertheless,

familiar with his name. They looked upon Dickens as the spirit of Christmas Incarnate: as being, in a word, Father Christmas himself. (Patten et al, p.58)

The mark left by his Christmas books is only a tiny sliver of his celebrity status, as it could be argued that there was one part he enjoyed more than writing his books, a process that could often result excruciating for him; and that was reading his texts aloud to an audience. He was quite the showman and was fully committed to give memorable performances in every one of his readings. Equipped with a desk he himself designed to show his upper body when reading, (Litvack, 2017b) he toured the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States multiple times. Dr Litvack explains how he adapted his novels and kept in the necessary bits to emphasize character and the aspects of speech people recognized from the book and were expecting in a performance. Dickens would gesture and engage with the audience, making them laugh or cry as he went along. His readings were thoroughly thought out and he knew how to give a proper spectacle: being the author of the books and having performed hundreds of times, he could have easily recited the 3 hour act from memory, but he knew people expected to see a book in the hand of the man who authored those texts, so he complied. People were reportedly amazed at the stamina and physicality of his readings, and he has very clear in this determination to focus only on providing entertainment through the text, not on making a display of his personality.

Following up on the point about how he considered every aspect of his performances, he aimed to create a cozy and domestic feel in his venues. Readings were meant to be “like the quiet narration of a story by one’s fireside-colloquial, easy, cultivated”, and his efforts did work on the public, a Belfast newspaper reporting that “he reads as if he were not reading, but telling his story plainly, and without apparent effort, to a circle of friends.” (Andrews, p.72) Interestingly enough he did not have a powerful voice and it was “a bit husky and monotonous [...] there's also the slightest hint of a lisp” though they concede how engaging he is: “We're soon lost in the story-or is it in the storyteller?” (Andrews, p.7)

Being a celebrity, so close and dedicated to the people, did come with its drawbacks, and for Dickens this took the form of being usually mobbed in the streets by crowds of adoring fans. There are a variety of times when this happened to him, perhaps more notably during his American tours. Biographer Michael Slater writes “Crowds followed Dickens everywhere, including the Tremont Theatre,” (Slater, 2011, p.180) young ladies solicited flocks of the author’s flowing hair, and “everyone who was anyone

in Boston society paid him a visit.” This level of attention was initially welcomed and the writer was generous with his time, but it eventually started to restrict his freedom: “I can do nothing that I want to do, go nowhere where I want to go, and see nothing that I want to see. If I turn into the street, I am followed by a multitude,” he wrote in a letter to his friend and confidant John Forster (p.324).

A celebrity being followed and stalked by a crazed fan is sadly not an uncommon occurrence nowadays, but as this section aims to show, everything we nowadays associate with celebrity Dickens, in fact, had experienced first. His documented run-in with a stalker took place during the second American Tour, which started in 1867. The fan in question was Jane Bigelow, wife of one of Dickens’s acquaintances; and by the looks of things quite a character, being called at one stage “such an incubus” by Boston writer Annie Fields in her diary. She turned from obnoxious to stalker when her behaviour “at last brought the matter to a crisis:” (Curry, p.11) she physically assaulted another woman, Mrs. Hertz, who had had a regular meeting with the writer for “daring” (Curry, p.13) to enter Dickens’s room alone. This resulted in Dickens banishing Mrs. Bigelow from his circles, though she still tried to see him more times while he was in New York.

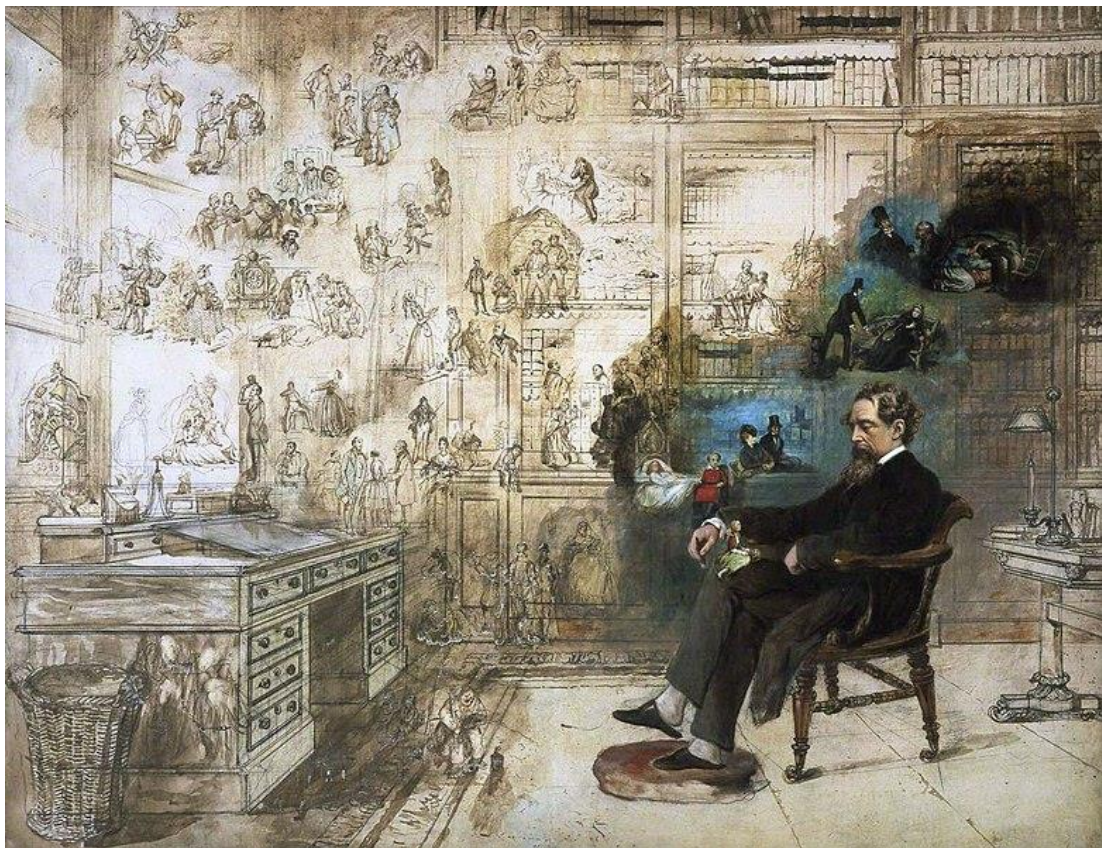
As stated previously, the role of imagery in celebrity is crucial, and Victorian times were no exception. Marsh tells in this article how Dickens was “the most photographically known person in Britain outside the royal family.” (Marsh, p.104) During the mid-19th century there was a trend in Victorian society to trade photographs called *carte de visite*, images the size of playing cards, and this helped spread the face of the writer everywhere. Some people used to own as much as six Dickens cards, with booksellers and photographers making as many of them as they could since they were considered sure to sell. Everyone knew Dickens and felt like they owned a part of him, as Marsh points out the cards were “a kind of currency.” (Marsh, p.104)

As it is always the case with new inventions comes new trickery, and who else better than Dickens to become a victim. Due to the lack of copyright celebrities had over their own image these *cartes de visite* were distributed all over without the person appearing in them seeing a single cent of profit or having a say in the image itself. This is how Dickens ended up as possibly one of the earliest victims of unsolicited photo editing, well over a century before the era of digital photo retouching. The original image had him standing in the steps of his residence in Gads Hill Place while holding a cup of wine and accompanied by multiple friends. The edited version saw the cup replaced by a book, what the people expected in his hands, and the friends removed. Moreover,

according to close friends, Dickens is completely unrecognisable in the low-quality edited version.



Another aspect close to celebrity is that of fan art, that is, what the audience gives back to the famous individual or what they do their memory. Popular as he was, Dickens was a recipient of fan art, perhaps the most notable example of it being the posthumous painting by Robert Williams Buss called Dickens's Dream. .



The painting depicts Dickens in his studio in Gads Hill Place and as Litvack points out, it gives the idea of Dickens as a creator or character, as he is surrounded by a cloud containing various characters from his novels. Only the closest to him, the one he cared most about, are coloured in, with the ones farther away being barely sketches. Buss did a lot of research to create this dreamlike scene, taking out volumes of the various novels and studying the original illustrations so he could represent the characters in the way Dickens envisaged and the people had come to know. Buss also drew inspiration from an earlier painting by Luke Field which contains the same location but with the writer missing; Field's painting, named 'The Empty Chair', depicted the void Dickens' passing had left in Victorian society and how deeply appreciated he was.

Now that we are touching on matters around the time of the author's death it is quite fitting to discuss how his celebrity status caused problems in something that should be as straight forwards as choosing his burial site. The official version of the event states that Dickens left instructions to be:

Buried in an inexpensive, unostentatious, and strictly private manner; that no public announcement be made of the time or place of my burial; that at the utmost not more than three plain mourning coaches be employed; and that those who attend my funeral wear no scarf, cloak, black bow, long hat-band, or other such revolting absurdity. (Litvack, 2020)

But for different reasons those plans were not followed. According to Forster, it was the media, particularly The Times who "took the lead in suggesting that the only fit resting place for the remains of a man so dear to England was the abbey in which the most illustrious Englishman are laid," (Litvack, 2020) that is, the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. In the end, much in contradiction to Dickens' wishes, there was a big ceremony, including three days with an open grave so the public could go to mourn him. Dickens's widow even received a message of condolence from Queen Victoria.

The real version of the events, as it turns out, was quite different. In short, John Forster and the Dean of Westminster, a man named Arthur Stanley, never intended to follow Dickens's instructions. Both plotted to have him buried in the place where celebrated writers go in order to expand the writer's reputation even after his death, and for selfish personal gain. Forster claimed that the graves the author would have preferred were closed, when in fact they were not, and pushed for the grave to be in the Abbey to enhance his reputation. Stanley, who first met Dickens in 1870, the year he died, started to think about his burial the moment he met him since he could add the author to the list

of notable people he had interred. Only two days after Dickens's passing, he wrote: "I never met (Dickens) till this year... And now he is gone ... and it is not improbable that I may bury him" (Litvack, 2020). He then pulled strings so he could get family approval. After all was said and done, the Dean thanked Forster for his role in the plot:

You are very good to speak so warmly of any assistance I may have rendered in carrying out your wishes and the desire of the country on the occasion of the funeral. The recollection of it will always be treasured amongst the most interesting of the various experiences which I have traversed in my official life. (Litvack, 2020)

This posthumous bit of drama to feed off the celebrity status of Dickens was uncovered by Dr Litvack recently, who points that "the lives and deaths of the rich and famous are open to question and forensic investigation – even long after their histories have been written and accepted as canonical." (Litvack, 2020)

Yet another recent discovery about the author's private life helps us to draw similarities between Dickens and current day celebrities, this one of a more scandalous nature. This one touches on the ways celebrities control the narratives around them to keep certain aspects of their life quiet and focus attention on others. Dickens, familiar as he was with his public adoration, knew he could not afford to divorce his wife Catherine Hogarth without risking massive backlash from the Victorian society in which he lived. Therefore, he kept his separation quiet while he spent the last years of his life with his mistress Ellen Ternan, who was 27 years younger than him. That much was known previously, what the new discoveries reveal however, is that Dickens tried to have his wife banished into a mental institution to remove the possibility of her calling his bluff. (Karasz, 2019) He even tried to have one of his friends who was psychiatrist diagnose her with "moral insanity," and when he refused, Dickens called the doctor a "medial donkey." (Karasz, 2019) This is probably the most clear example of Dickens using heavy-handed methods to bend public opinion in his favour, another instance of such manipulation occurred when he burned 20 years' worth of letters and documentation in his backyard, something which made the task of piecing together the most private aspects of his life difficult for upcoming researchers. Influential people using their power to control what is said of them is a tale as old as time, and it shows that even the most virtuous of people have things they would rather keep under the rug.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned earlier, doing an overview of the life of Charles Dickens is a daunting task, which is why I chose to highlight one brief part of his life and focus on unravelling how that touched many aspects of his career. His resolve when championing social causes was next to none in that period, putting his money where his mouth was and taking it upon himself to run an asylum for those in need, despite laws at the time being written in order to brush aside marginal people. Perhaps the most shocking part was learning the lengths to which the love for his characters went, with the author digging deep in his aching feelings to make David for *Copperfield* a true-to-life individual with whom the readers could relate.

When it comes to celebrity, I have explored the agreed history of this new social status group, the characteristics that make it similar and different from previous high-status groups, as well as some of the privileges it gives to those who belong to the group. Some wrong predictions about celebrity have also been covered, mainly Max Weber's one, who said groups like celebrity would disappear under capitalism. Little did he know the same reasons he gave for the disappearance of celebrity were the same ones that allowed it to define our current understanding of consumer media. The volatility and fast-paced nature of the phenomenon means only the most remarkable few survive the test of time and become objects of study.

Surely one of the earliest big figures in transforming celebrity into a global affair was Charles Dickens, the definitive celebrity from a time in which some argue such a figure did not exist. He was loved for his works, for his acting in front of the people and the way he engaged with them. His novels defined our festivities and championed social causes, which may explain why he was adored in the English-speaking world back then, and worldwide now. His celebrity status inspired artwork and even had people looking to feed off it; and of course, he had a questionable side to his morality which he tried to keep away from the public eye. He constructed his public persona in a careful and studied manner the way only true celebrities can.

The study of the celebrity phenomenon, of course, reveals as much about the individual as it does about the society in which the celebrity exists. Dickens, along with the other multiple people that I have mentioned along the way, existed at a time that could afford the existence of such figures, that it is to say, there were enough technological developments, in the form of mass printing and photographs, to spread their fame; but

much more crucially, there were people hungry for what they had to say. The combination of those factors made it so that the English people at the time were precisely the primordial soup a writer like Charles Dickens needed in order to flex his muscles and show what he had to contribute both as an entertainer and as a social critic.

Perhaps it is hard to think after reading many accounts of his dedication to his craft, his lively spirit, and his clinical understanding of celebrity that a man of his calibre would not have been renowned in any time period, whatever the skill to which he applied his talents.

He may not have been the first celebrity of his time, but he certainly is the finest example of a trend that has continued into the present. It may not be a reach to say that the celebrity phenomenon has defined modernity, and that by perpetuating this trend, modern celebrities are standing on the shoulders of giants from the past like Charles Dickens.

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